

CRYPTOFICTION: A RENAISSANCE
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Cryptozoological fiction has a long history. There's no doubt tales of monsters predate the written word. Early humans hardly needed to make up tales as they tangled with cave bears, cave lions, sabertooths, and the other predators of their day, but dragons and great serpents and sea monsters became staples of the storyteller's art. History and myth became hopelessly interwoven as the ancient creatures of Japan and China and Africa were talked about while Native Americans spoke of the thunderbird and Norsemen traded tales of kraken.

I used to be able to keep up with all the cryptozoology novels: in the indie age, I couldn't hope to do so, so I have to pick the ones that look intriguing. Some of these are pretty good, some are dreadful. There are also some good novels from established publishers: indeed, the last two years have been very good for cryptozoology-themed fiction. We've had high-octane thrillers like Hawthorne's *Kronos Rising*, atmospheric novels like Willis' *The Daedalus and the Deep*, chillers like *Below*, a crypto subplot in a Dan Simmons epic and a major plot point in a Preston/Childs scientific thriller, and the scariest crypto-novel ever, Joseph Wallace's *Invasive Species*. The genre has never been healthier, in quantity or quality.

That is, assuming we can define cryptofiction. I suggest that, if the novel makes an attempt to depict a believable creature with a believable origin, it qualifies, even if those attempts might fall short. The line between cryptozoology and monster-themed horror

is a fuzzy one, and perhaps we shouldn't try too hard to pin it down. If the creature is central to the novel and is alleged to exist, or could exist, in the real world, it probably qualifies. For example, my own novel *The Dolmen* (Wolfsinger, 2014) discusses a scientific origin for creatures from folklore: some may class it as cryptofiction though I think of it more as horror. Also on the borders of cryptofiction are novels like C.J. Waker's *Predator X* (Severed Press, 2014) in which the cryptozoological creature is an obstacle to the heroes but the novel is about something else entirely (alien contact, in Walker's case). Outside cryptofiction, I think, are the novels about creating new creatures, like Scott Sigler's very good 2011 thriller *Ancestor*. (One other trend, cryptozoology-themed pornography, is beyond my powers to even form a coherent thought about.)

One thing I need to mention in the new age of publishing is that some readers, such as myself, are put off by writing that does not display a mastery of English grammar. It's all right to break the rules when warranted in accordance with your particular style (especially in dialogue), but unless the novel is mainly written in accordance with proper English, the flourishes won't be memorable. *The Elements of Style* and *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* should be on everyone's bookshelf. I do wish that every author intending to write direct via e-publishing would hire an editor or make themselves into one. One might say I shouldn't be giving advice, given that my own books are hardly bestsellers, but I've been reading cryptofiction for over 40 years and have a good idea of what works, and I'm hardly the only reader who demands authors show mastery of the language in which they write.

A good guide for those wanting to stick to well-written novels is to look at the synopsis on the author's website or the online seller's site: if the author couldn't get the language right in this paragraph, it won't be good in the novel. (I speak here, of course, only of material written by/for readers of English.) It's necessary to do a bit of reading and not just rely on reviews to pick a promising read, given that it's become a common practice (and I don't really see how it could be stamped out) to have close friends and relatives put up five-star reviews about even the worst novels.

A dominant theme in cryptofiction is the first contact between a stunned human and a cryptid. An example is J.M. Bailey's novel about finding Sasquatch—or, rather, being found by Sasquatch. *Eve* (CreateSpace, 2012) is a well-written bit of speculation by an author who knows the wilderness and her Sasquatch lore (the old Albert Ostman tall tale of being kidnapped by a Sasquatch family is an obvious influence.) Bailey also makes a brave and successful decision as a writer by making her first-person narrator a profane and not entirely likable woman. The narrator's descriptions of her feelings about the hominid Sasquatch she meets are sometimes a little hyperbolic, but, to be fair, she is describing an event that would pretty much blow the fuses in the human brain. Bailey has moved on to the sequel, *Iron Mountain Ridge*.

Eve leads us to the point that all good fiction is about characters, whether human or nonhuman. A continuing character some readers will know is Lee Murphy's George Kodiak. Murphy is on his game in his latest, *The Road to Loch Ness* (Defining Moments Press, 2014), where his tough-guy cryptozoologist heads to Scotland, where he finds adversaries old and new as well as the creature. (I won't say what it is Kodiak finds. The solution seems a little less plausible to me than the giant eels of Steve Alten's *The Loch*, but it's fun.) This is the first of the Kodiak novels to show the character really growing: Kodiak is a three-dimensional human with foibles and limitations, and the unexpected romance he finds in this novel is genuinely touching. In another common theme, Murphy loves the latest in technology, and there are cool gadgets to go with the cool creatures. (I'll nitpick only one here: the X-Ray mode on his high-tech diving helmet couldn't really work with X-rays, although there is some promising research into a "see through walls" capability using radio waves.) This is one of those books where grammar traditionalists like myself will frown on occasion, but the plotting and pacing are good, and the reader will find plenty of surprises.

I personally, as a reader, can do without psychic or mystical elements in cryptid stories: however, it's fiction, and every author will go in a different direction. *Eve* and *The Road to Loch Ness* are examples where such elements exist but never overwhelm the story.

Some cryptofiction hops or combines genres. Greig Beck's *The First Bird* (Momentum, 2013), for example, is a lost world thriller which segues into a doomsday disease thriller. The lost world section is original and well researched, even if the laws of biology concerning giant arthropods are bent out of shape. Beck's characters are three-dimensional people you can believe in—and fear for. It's a better book than his *Beneath the Dark Ice* (St. Martin's, 2010), which is an example of mixing cryptozoology with military adventure. (*Dark Ice* also an example of a common problem with “lost ecosystem” novels—readers may wonder whether the system could support so many big predators).

A heavyweight in recent cryptofiction is Max Hawthorne's 542-page *Kronos Rising* (Far From the Tree Press, 2013), which is also interesting in that the author has put on a Master's class in how to promote your small-press or self-published book using social media, contests, etc. Novels about very large, scary predators often hand-wave the science and feed us expendable cardboard characters. (I thought Steve Alten's original *Meg* exemplified this, but Alten has gotten a lot better: his Megalodon protagonist Jonas has gotten more believable and vulnerable with age, and his Loch Ness novel is one of the high points in all of cryptofiction.) Hawthorne does a great job on the second point with interesting characters and human drama. Everyone has an interesting backstory, which helps us cheer on the heroes and slightly humanizes the villains. The science can be nitpicked (rorquals do not echolocate), but Hawthorne, a champion angler, knows the sea and ships, which helps enormously. Finally, there's good plotting and pacing to make everything else hum along.

This brings up a couple of issues with “prehistoric survival” novels: one is how the species survived to the present, and the other (less critical but always interesting) is how much it's evolved. A universal tendency with millions of years of evolution (see Hawthorne, Alten, Charles Wilson's *Extinct*, etc.) is making the creatures bigger and smarter. Hawthorne's marine reptiles have evolved that way, plus adding echolocation, but all that is permissible in fiction as long as it's not pushed beyond plausibility.

Survival is a tougher story: the animals need an ecosystem that keeps them alive without too many encounters with humans. Alten's latest crypto novel, *Meg: Hell's Aquarium* (Tor edition, 2010) spends considerable time explaining how this worked, and he gets credit for the effort even if there are still nitpicks. Hawthorne tries hard with a story that traps two kronosaurs in a volcanic cone after the K-T asteroid impact, though he leaves the intervening millennia a little fuzzy. This won't bother anyone looking for a fun cryptofiction thriller, though, because *Kronos Rising* delivers in so many other ways that you can overlook imperfections.

Matt Willis' *The Daedalus and the Deep* (Cotero Publishing, 2012) goes in a different direction, Willis takes one of the most famous reported encounters in cryptozoology and asks what might have happened if the corvette had not merely reported a sea serpent but chased it hell-bent, determined to secure it for the honor of England, its Navy, and the ship's captain. While trying not to spoil the plot too much, there is a science fiction element: it's not by accident that the *Daedalus* and the creature came together, and their running fight over many days and thousands of miles is driven by the creature as much, or more than, by the obsessed captain. It's entertaining and original, and it helps that Willis has studied the days of sail and gives us a thorough introduction to the *Daedalus*' world in the course of telling his story. Dean Koontz once said that you can make a reader swallow one huge improbability if every other detail is nailed down in fact, and that's a good rule.

Other authors go deep into the science of their creatures. Joseph Wallace's *Invasive Species* (Berkley, 2013) does everything right: good characters, a killer premise, well-researched locations, and gruesomely scary details to complement very good science. Wallace's "thieves" are several evolutionary steps beyond any known insect, but you can work out why they would have evolved this way, and the result is terrifyingly plausible. The hive-mind intelligence gets a little far out, but even here Joseph grounds the thieves' capabilities in what we know about hive minds and mentions genuine scientific questions. His concepts of how

parasitic hosts exploit and control their prey have real analogues in nature, including those hellishly alien fungi that control the minds of ants. On the writing side, Wallace also creates characters we care about—but is never afraid to kill anyone in the service of the story. Suspense is always heightened when we the readers know no character is safe.

An example where the cryptid stirs the drink instead of being the main course is Dan Simmons' *The Abominable* (Little, Brown & Company, 2013). As with most Simmons books, the detail in this epic is astonishing. The history of mountaineering is told in the buildup to a deadly cat and mouse game in a realm where humans need every bit of stamina and grit just to stay alive, and yet must also fight for their lives. Those wanting to learn about the yeti will not find a lot of detail, but the subject is pivotal at two points. To keep from spoiling it, I won't say whether Simmons' novel presents the metohkangmi as real animals, but it's a novel well worth reading despite its 672 pages. A cryptid is more important in the latest Douglas Preston / Lincoln Childs scientific thriller, *Lost Island*. I doubt their human-related cryptid would have evolved the way it did, but these guys always do their darndest to put real science behind their work, and they usually have other interesting angles: here they speculate that the most famous of fictional journeys in Greek literature is a report of a real voyage, "monster" and all.

Another novel that gives us good creatures and good human characters is Ryan Lockwood's *Below* (Pinnacle, 2013). Lockwood's details of the sea and diving are very interesting, the science behind the animals involved is stretched only a little, and he takes his time introducing a believable story about believable people. In this case, it's not cryptofiction in the sense of discovering a new species, but he makes the Humboldt squid into a great threat: a little too smart and too emotional, but otherwise believably scary.

One way to divide cryptofiction is into novels concerned with one species that's undiscovered or presumed extinct vs. novels about entire ecosystems. The most elaborate of the ecosystem novels is Warren Fahy's *Pandemonium*. In this sequel to *Fragment*,

which created a new ecosystem on an isolated island, *Pandemonium* moves the action to an underground sea in the former USSR and brings back creatures from his first ecosystem to collide with an entirely new one. The work involved in Fahy's research is a little dizzying. I thought the *Fragment* ecosystem was a bit short on underlying nutrient sources and a bit heavy on big (or very numerous) predators, but it was thoroughly enjoyable anyway: *Pandemonium* has a bit of the same weakness but is so overwhelmingly entertaining that it didn't even slow me down.

The common threads in this discussion are, I think, that science and creature biology are getting better (at least in the fiction I read), and that successful cryptofiction authors are doing better at the "other" creatures—the humans. There have been novels, even from major publishers (Dave Freedman's *Natural Selection* (2006) comes to mind) where the science is awful and the human characters evoke no emotional reaction except "glad another one got eaten."

I've deliberately avoided naming the really terrible self-published work I've read, because self-published work has always included some good stuff (Eric Penz' *Cryptid* (2006) is one of the all-time best cryptonovels) and the likelihood of first-rate cryptofiction from the biggest publishers may decline with their increasing bottom-line focus on sure-thing bestsellers from established names. The new world of electronic publishing, self-publishing, and very small publishers that may focus mainly on e-books means it takes only a very small outlay to get one's book published in the sense of being available on Amazon or other hubs of commerce. There are still advantages to working with big publishers, including marketing (for some books), but mostly in distribution to physical stores and getting reviews from newspapers and other media that still don't cater to anything self-published. Prepare, though, for a lot of rejections and a lot of work. You'll need an agent for any of the Big Six publishers: for other publishing approaches, agents are helpful but not mandatory.

One final bit of advice for self-publishers: a lot of self-published covers shout "amateur." It's worth hiring someone who can create

a cover that will look professional in full size but still be readable and eye-catching as a tiny thumb on a website. Cryptozoology artist Bill Rebsamen's cover for *The Dolmen* is, I think, superb on both counts.

Essentially, good cryptofiction is good fiction. The best cryptonovels are done by people who not only understand their zoology and/or cryptozoology, but who put in the time and effort to hone their ability to write and the many component skills of writing: plot, character, conflict, and so on.

I have to come back one more time to editing. A self-published Bigfoot novel I won't name says on its Amazon page that it was put out before being professionally edited, and the author asks you to pardon her mistakes. That's the wrong approach. If you want people to buy it, and especially if you want them to buy any sequels, the first product you put out has to be as good as it can possibly be. Be patient!

Is there room for more cryptofiction? Absolutely. There is sort of a glut around Loch Ness and Sasquatch, though the best novels will always find audiences. Sharks are still hot (a special award for Best Title should go to Briar Lee Mitchell, whose debut, which I've bought but have not yet read, is called simply *Big Ass Shark*). Past those two, there are many creatures of fact and legend to work with. Some authors have already probed new ground, as Lee Murphy did with his surprise solution to the Honey Island swamp monster in 2012's *Heretofore: Unknown*. There have only been a couple of novels probing the rich history of sea serpent sightings/mythology: interesting creatures like the buru, the Kamchatka giant bear, the various amphibious or saber-toothed cats, and many other denizens of cryptozoology remain unvisited.

So if you want to be a cryptonovelist, the publishing revolution has made it easier than ever. Start thinking about what would happen if your favorite creature was discovered, how such a discovery might be made, and what might happen to the people involved. If you think about these and conclude that, yes, you really do have something original and thought-provoking to say, then start honing your writing skills. (No one is born a writer: it's a

craft that demands and rewards serious effort. So is marketing, for that matter.) Happy Reading, and Happy Writing!

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